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Like its sister city San Francisco, Oakland began experiencing cases of influenza in late-September 1918. On September 26, three cases were reported in the city. All three victims were from different neighborhoods, suggesting to health officials that other areas would likely soon be affected as well. But unlike San Francisco, where the number of new influenza cases exploded quickly from the first reported victims, the initial progression of the epidemic in Oakland was slow: by mid-October only 223 cases had been reported to health authorities.¹

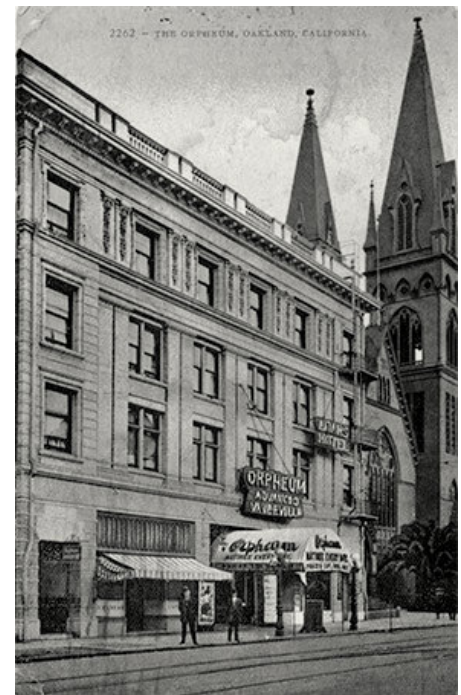
Perhaps because of the epidemic's slow start, Oakland's initial response to the threat was also rather unhurried. Residents were advised to be vigilant and to use antiseptic throat and nasal solutions. The Health Department ordered all saloons, soda fountains, and other places serving drinks to disinfect their glassware. On the evening of October 13, the Commissioner of the Department of Public Health and Safety, Dr. F. F. Jackson, met with a group of 100 local physicians to discuss the impending epidemic and to prepare the city's response. The group decided to have movie theaters screen short films about influenza prevention and to use schools to disseminate prevention materials to students. Physicians were urged to isolate their patients. The hope was that school, church, and business closures would not be necessary if enough preventive and educational action was taken.²

It came as somewhat of a shock, therefore, when Mayor John L. Davies suddenly announced on October 18 a citywide closure of all theaters, movie houses, places of public amusement, schools, and churches (although open air services were allowed). The reason for the sudden reversal in policy: the appointment of Dr. Daniel Crosby to replace former City Health Officer Dr. Kirby Smith, who had resigned in order to take a post in the Army Medical Corps. Health Officer Crosby was of a very different mind on the matter of the epidemic, and believed that more active measures than education and risk prevention were necessary if Oakland's influenza epidemic was going to be kept under control. On the very afternoon of his appointment Crosby appeared before the City Council and pointed out the gravity of the situation, suggesting that Oakland enact the same precautions as San Francisco had. Mayor Davies took Crosby's information and advice seriously and, weighing it alongside similar recommendations from both state and federal authorities, decided to issue the closure order.³

The closure order came none too soon. Within a few days the epidemic exploded across the city, and by October 23 there were 2,200 reported cases in Oakland. Gauze, already at a premium during the war, became ever scarcer as residents began turning the material into face masks. The Health Department informed the community that wholesale druggists were nearly out of many necessary drugs. To help alleviate the pressure on the main city health care facilities, the city auditorium was converted into an 80-bed emergency hospital, with the city prison chain gang pressed into service to prepare the facility. A few days after opening, the Auditorium Hospital was admitting patients at the rate of one every fifteen minutes. The emergency hospital primarily served the poor, and those unable to pay were treated for free. The sheer volume of patients admitted—despite pre-screening by nurses to ensure that only serious influenza cases were placed in a bed—put a tremendous strain on resources, and an urgent call for beds, bedding, cooked food, and other supplies was made to the community.⁴ So quickly



A view of City Hall and the surrounding area, Oakland. Built in 1914, it was the tallest building west of the Mississippi at the time.



The Orpheum Theater in Oakland.

did the case numbers rise that cafes, restaurants, and saloons closed early for the first time in memory due to a lack of business.⁵

On October 24, the Oakland City Council met in special session and issued a mandatory mask ordinance. Beginning October 25, all Oakland residents and visitors would be required to wear a mask while in public, with stiff penalties ranging from fines of \$5 to \$100 and up to ten days in the city jail for failure to comply.⁶ To aid police in catching mask scofflaws, the City commissioned 300 men and women to act as special “War Service” deputies, charged with securing the names and addresses of those caught without their masks on in public so that police could more easily apprehend them at a later time.⁷ As Oaklanders prepared to don their masks, the local chapter of the Red Cross busily constructed 50,000 of the devices to distribute throughout the city.⁸

Just as in San Francisco, Oakland’s mask ordinance was met with mixed feelings. The very first day it went into effect two men were held up at gunpoint by two robbers wearing flu masks to conceal their identities.⁹ On the other hand, a local rabbi tried to entice his congregants to accept masks by telling them that masked women were more intriguing to men.¹⁰ A newspaper article in the “Society and Women’s” section said the flu mask had “turned the social—as opposed to the anti-social—part of our people into a colossal Ku-Klux Klan, but for good instead of evil, so whereas should we worry, assuming a clean conscience dwelleth behind the mask?”¹¹ Cigar shop owners almost universally hated the ordinances wherever they were passed. One entrepreneurial shopkeeper in Oakland, however, capitalized on the law by creating a unique mask with a flap over the mouth, allowing smokers to enjoy their cigars while still complying with the law. Selling these masks alongside her cigars increased her business one hundred percent.¹²

As cases mounted—over 3,500 cases were reported by October 26, with 517 new cases added to the list that very morning—Oaklanders resorted to some rather novel ways to meet the demands of the epidemic. Actresses, thrown out of work by the closure of theaters, volunteered their service as nurses. Likewise, the Red Cross and city health officials summoned teachers to the emergency hospital in the city auditorium to begin immediate training as volunteer nurses. Even prisoners from the city jail were pressed into service at the emergency hospital. So impressed with their performance was the Chief of Police (who had suffered a severe case of the flu himself in late-October), that he publicly stated that he would ask for the parole of all prisoners who had volunteered.¹³ Prisoners were also used to dig graves in the local cemeteries, as regular gravediggers could not keep up with the pace of burials.¹⁴

In the last few days of October the Oakland’s flu situation improved slightly, and health officials issued cautiously worded but nonetheless optimistic statements to the public that the end of the epidemic was under control. Still, Oakland officials ramped up their efforts to ensure compliance with mask efforts. On November 1, the City Council officially passed the mask ordinance. **Police were ordered to arrest all persons caught not wearing a mask while on Oakland’s streets.** Without even hearing the cases yet, one police judge said he would impose the maximum sentence—up to \$100 fine and ten days imprisonment—on anyone brought before him for violating the mask order.¹⁵ More than 200 people were arrested in the first day and a half of the order. The first 97 defendants arraigned were charged a fine of \$10 each or five days in jail; most opted to pay their fine promptly and be on their way. Judges warned violators that repeat offenders would most definitely face imprisonment. They were also admonished for being slackers. “It is a shame that good citizens should be brought into police court for violating the new mask ordinance,” said one police judge. “While doctors and hundreds of volunteer citizens are giving their time to help check this epidemic every patriotic citizen should cooperate.”¹⁶ The message to all residents was clear: Oakland officials were serious about the mask order.

The number of new cases declined steadily throughout late-October and early-November, which health officials attributed to the widespread use of masks. They also attributed it to the zealous arresting of violators by police officers, who made examples of any and all mask “slackers” they could catch.¹⁷ As the number of cases and deaths began to decline, Oakland began to relax its guard. Starting on Sunday,

November 10, churchgoers were allowed to attend half-hour services. That day, only 54 new flu cases were reported to officials, leading everyone to conclude optimistically that the end of the epidemic was near. The emergency hospital saw a drastic decrease in the number of new admittances, leading Health Officer Crosby to declare its closure as of midnight, November 15.¹⁸ More important to residents, however, was the announcement that the City's closure order would be removed on Saturday, November 16. Finally, on Tuesday, November 19, came the best news to residents: Mayor Davie's announcement that masks could be removed at midnight. The not-so-good news for children was that schools would re-open on Monday, November 25.¹⁹

As in many other cities, cases continued to appear in December and into January 1919. As influenza appeared to make a second strong showing in Oakland, one city commissioner pressed for another mask order as was being contemplated in nearby San Francisco. Health Officer Crosby, however, did not agree, arguing that there would be cases for several months to come but that there simply were too few cases currently to justify such strong action.²⁰ Instead, he urged residents to isolate themselves if they felt ill. Besides, he added, **recent medical reports and conferences had concluded that there was no appreciable difference in outcome whether a city resorted to mask ordinances or not.**²¹

Throughout January cases began to mount again, although nowhere near the same levels that had visited Oakland during the dreaded second wave of the epidemic. Health Officer Crosby was still hesitant to revisit the idea of another closure order or mask ordinance, however. Tensions mounted as the weeks passed, culminating in a city council meeting on January 21 to decide whether or not to pass a second mask ordinance. Christian Scientists, labor representatives, and theater and movie house owners and managers vigorously protested the measure. Perhaps the most vocal opponent was Mayor Davie, who angrily recounted the story of his arrest in Sacramento for not wearing a mask and the humiliation he had to endure while waiting in jail for police to arrest someone else who could make change for the \$20 the mayor had on him. Davie read from a recent California State Board of Health report that declared that universal masking "proved to be of no value." At one point Davie stated that, "the mask is just what it is named—a mask—a camouflage." A physician present commented that, "if a cave man should appear in San Francisco he would think the masked citizens all lunatics." In the end, the Council decided to lay the ordinance on the table so that it might be passed at a later date if necessary.²² As the number of new cases dwindled to zero, no further action was taken.

The epidemic affected nearly every aspect of life in Oakland. Garbage collection became difficult, for example, when, in early November 75 of the 90-man sanitation force came down with influenza. In many districts, trash simply piled up along the curb, waiting to be hauled off by men too sick to work.²³ Election Day saw a lack of sufficient numbers of poll workers due to both illness and the fear of contagion. Influenza did not dissuade a group of a dozen men from arguing over the election results, who, **when they adjusted their masks, were promptly arrested and fined \$10 each for failure to comply with the ordinance. Their defense—that their masks handicapped them in their arguments with "more fluent talkers"—apparently did not impress the judge.**²⁴

But the epidemic was not merely an inconvenience; it was a deadly killer. During the devastating second wave of the epidemic—from October 1918 to February 1919—nearly 1,300 Oaklanders died of the disease. The result was a total excess death rate of 506 per 100,000 people. Somewhat surprisingly, Oakland did significantly better than did San Francisco, which had an excess death rate of 673 per 100,000, one of the worst in the nation. The reasons for the striking differences between two cities only miles apart are uncertain, but may lie in the relative quickness in each city's response as well as the length of which epidemic control measures were kept in place: Oakland was twice as quick to respond with closure orders in its epidemic as was San Francisco, and kept those measures in place for nearly twice as long. Perhaps Oakland officials, looking west across the Bay, learned from some of the mistakes made by San Francisco officials in the handling of the epidemic.

NOTES

- ¹ “Mare Island Now Target of Influenza,” *Oakland Tribune*, 27 Sept. 1918, 20; “Influenza Cases Held in Check,” *Oakland Tribune*, 13 Oct. 1918, 48; “Flu Makes Only Slight Inroad Here,” *Oakland Tribune*, 17 Oct. 1918, 4.
- ² “Epidemic of Flu Is at Standstill,” *Oakland Tribune*, 15 Oct. 1918, 14.
- ³ “Theaters, Churches Are Closed by Mayor,” *Oakland Tribune*, 18 Oct. 1918, 1.
- ⁴ “Drug, Gauze Famine to Be New Menace,” *Oakland Tribune*, 23 Oct. 1918, 12; “Auditorium Houses New Flu Patients,” *Oakland Tribune*, 22 Oct. 1918, 4; “Give Us Beds, Bedding’ Is the Plea of Flu Hospital,” *Oakland Tribune*, 24 Oct. 1918, 7.
- ⁵ “Bars, Cafes in Dark; Patrons Are Missing,” *Oakland Tribune*, 24 Oct. 1918, 7.
- ⁶ “Wear Mask, Says Law, or Face Arrest,” *Oakland Tribune*, 25 Oct. 1918, 1.
- ⁷ “Flu Cops Are Given Order,” *Oakland Tribune*, 26 Oct. 1918, 7.
- ⁸ “Fund Is Growing to Make Flu Masks,” *Oakland Tribune*, 26 Oct. 1918, 7.
- ⁹ “Flu Mask Is Worn by Holdup man,” *Oakland Tribune*, 25 Oct. 1918, 16.
- ¹⁰ “Dr. Franklin Writes Sermon for Sunday,” *Oakland Tribune*, 26 Oct. 1918, 4.
- ¹¹ “Society and Women’s Page,” *Oakland Tribune*, 27 Oct. 1918, 25.
- ¹² “Cigar Stores are Miffed at Masks,” *Oakland Tribune*, 26 Oct. 1918, 7; “Flu Mask with Door in It for Smokers, Fad,” *Oakland Tribune*, 16 Oct. 1918, 7.
- ¹³ “Flu Cases on Increase in Oakland,” *Oakland Tribune*, 26 Oct. 1918, 7; “Teachers Will Help Nurse, Call Is Issued for Meeting,” *Oakland Tribune*, 26 Oct. 1918, 7; “Policemen Must Wear Flu Masks,” *Oakland Tribune*, 26 Oct. 1918, 7.
- ¹⁴ “Chain Gang Sent to Aid Grave Diggers,” *Oakland Tribune*, 26 Oct. 1918, 7.
- ¹⁵ “Mask Order Law; Arrests Are Ordered,” *Oakland Enquirer*, 1 Nov. 1918, 9; “Fine Is Set on Men Who Drop Masks,” *Oakland Tribune*, 1 Nov. 1918, 12; “Arrest All Maskless as Cases Grow,” *Oakland Tribune*, 1 Nov. 1918, 18; “Death Toll From Flu 39 in 24 Hours,” *Oakland Tribune*, 2 Nov. 1918, 1.
- ¹⁶ “Hundred in Toils for Not Having Mask,” *Oakland Tribune*, 2 Nov. 1918, 1.
- ¹⁷ Within the first four days of the enforced version of the mask law, 709 citizens were arrested, \$6,500 was paid in fines, and \$590 was forfeited. The courts and the city jail were packed (although police insisted that there was still plenty of space in the cells), and masked judges turned down all excuses as they handed down their sentences. The *Tribune* described those sitting in the city jail awaiting arraignment: “Shrouded faces of those who had learned the error of their ways looked gloomily from prison bars last night like the Veiled Lady of Khartoum, for the first thing the police do is to see that a mask is properly worn in jail, where useful lessons in the art of wearing masks are enthusiastically administered by the jailers in charge.” See “488 Arrests Under Flu Mask Law,” *Oakland Tribune*, 3 Nov. 1918, 1, and “\$7000 Fines Paid in Flu Mask Cases,” *Oakland Tribune*, 4 Nov. 1918, 14.
- ¹⁸ “Influenza Hospital May Close Tonight,” *Oakland Tribune*, 14 Nov. 1918, 9.
- ¹⁹ “All Oakland Masks Will Go Off Tonight at Midnight,” 19 Nov. 1918, 1; “Schools to Be Opened Monday,” *Oakland Tribune*, 19 Nov. 1918, 2.
- ²⁰ “Delay Action on Flu Resolution,” *Oakland Tribune*, 31 Dec. 1918, 5.
- ²¹ “\$10,000 Pledged for Flu Fight,” *Oakland Tribune*, 8 Jan. 1919, 3.
- ²² “Flu Masking Ordinance is Turned Down,” *Oakland Tribune*, 21 Jan. 1919, 1; California Board of Health, *Twenty-Sixth Biennial report of the State Board of Health of California for the Fiscal Years from July 1, 1918, to June 30, 1920* (Sacramento: California State Printing Office, 1921), 24.
- ²³ “Arrest All Maskless as Cases Grow,” *Oakland Tribune*, 1 Nov. 1918, 18.
- ²⁴ “Early Vote Is Light; Officials Lacking,” *Oakland Tribune*, 5 Nov. 1918, 1; “Mask Violators Argue, Are Fined,” *Oakland Tribune*, 6 Nov. 1918, 5.

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